WEBSTER AND KOSSUTH

A DISCOURSE
ON THE RELATIONS OF
DANIEL WEBSTER AND LOUIS KOSSUTH

BY
EUGENE PIVÁNY
FORMERLY EDITOR OF "ÖNÁLLÁS"

1909
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WHEN Louis Kossuth, Ex-Governor of Hungary, arrived in the United States, in December, 1851, to thank the American people and Government for his liberation from confinement in Turkey and to enlist their aid in the expected renewal of Hungary's struggle for independence, the President of the United States was Millard Fillmore. He had been elected Vice President, but on the untimely death of General Taylor had to assume the responsibilities and duties of Chief Executive. Although possessing many admirable qualities, he was not a man of exceptional intellectual force or brilliancy of mind, and had in his youth few facilities for education. One of the Hungarian refugees remarked, indeed, in his diary, how they were astonished at President Fillmore's unfamiliarity with European history. The real leader of the country's foreign

policy was Daniel Webster who, then for the second time, graced the office of Secretary of State.

Louis Kossuth undoubtedly fills a much larger place in the history of Hungary than Daniel Webster does in that of the United States; besides, Providence made them run too different courses of life, to afford a just basis of comparison. Yet there are two characteristic facts in the lives of these giant minds, which bear so striking resemblance that in a discourse on their relations they cannot be overlooked.

They both were the greatest orators their respective countries had ever produced.

And they both devoted their whole lives to the same high ideal: nationality.

Daniel Webster to the development of the then still vaguely felt oneness of the American people as an indivisible nation, which he saw only too well was gravely menaced by the spirit of nullification and secession. Louis Kossuth to the full re-establishment of Hungary's separate national existence which, between the ravages of the Turk and the misgovernment of Austria, had become well-nigh illusory.

All who have ever heard Mr. Webster speak, were indelibly impressed by his presence. Al-

though of no extraordinary height, he was generally spoken of as a giant, and the mere look of his wonderful eyes sufficed to enchant his audience. Mr. Kossuth, though somewhat shorter of stature, had these same remarkable attributes. That mysterious faculty, personal magnetism, he possessed probably in a higher degree than Mr. Webster, and many Americans, drawn irresistably by his magic power of eloquence, followed him from place to place like planets their life-giving sun.

This is all the more marvelous, as he had to address the American people in a language acquired only after reaching manhood. At the age of thirty-five he incurred the displeasure of the Austrian Government for his journalistic activity and was thrown into prison. The first twelve months he was refused the use of books, but during the remaining two years of his captivity he was allowed to read books not pertaining to politics. So he asked for a set of Shakespeare, an English grammar, and Walker's Pronouncing Dictionary. He sat down without knowing a single word, and began to read the "Tempest," working for a fortnight to get through the first page. He had, he said, a certain rule never to go on reading anything without perfectly understanding what

he read; so he went on, and by-and-by became familiar with the rules and idioms of the English language. He had no opportunity, however, to put his knowledge to a practical test, and during the next eleven years, up to his departure for the United States, he had probably not met a dozen people whose mother tongue was English. In fact, so little did he suspect his extraordinary power in the use of English, that he wrote his *Address to the People of the United States,* dated Broussa, March 27, 1850, still in Hungarian and had it translated by a friend in America. To any one who has tried to master a foreign tongue, his unparalleled triumph in Great Britain and America as an orator, hardly a year later, must then seem little short of a miracle.

Although he spoke Latin fluently, that tongue having been still extensively used in Hungary in his youth as the medium of intercourse among the cultured and learned, he preferred, like Mr. Webster, to employ Anglo-Saxon words instead of Latin derivatives. From his great master, Shakespeare, he had acquired a stock of half-obsolete or archaic words which he could use with striking effect. But the chief elements of his success as an orator were, besides his magnetic personality, the sublimity

of the thoughts he espoused, the original grouping of facts, clarity of statement, lucidity of expression, purity of diction, and the judicial use of religious and poetic language, appealing both to the intellect and the emotions of his hearers.

Mr. Webster's public connection with the Kossuth or Hungarian question began with his speech in Faneuil Hall, in November, 1849, in which he, then Senator from Massachusetts, paid glowing tribute to the Hungarian heroes, severely arraigned Russia for her intervention in behalf of absolutism, and threatened her with the vengeance of the whole civilized world, should Kossuth's life be taken.

The next year witnessed his remarkable encounter with Chevalier Hülsemann, the history of which may be briefly summed up in the following:

The people and Government of the United States followed with great interest and anxiety the extraordinary events that took place in Europe in 1848 and 1849, and particularly the struggle of the Hungarians. They saw in them the dawning victory of their highest political ideals, of the very principles and institutions on which the existence, progress and prosperity of their own country were founded. In the

course of time they came to look upon the Hungarians not only as the fearless defenders of their own liberties, but also as the champions of human liberty in general, on whose success or failure depended the liberation of the Italian and other races in the Southeast of Europe from despotism. The sympathy for Hungary was so general and intense that President Taylor deemed it wise to send a "special and confidential agent," in the person of Mr. Ambrose Dudley Mann, of Virginia, to Hungary. His instructions were to report the actual condition of affairs in Hungary, with the view of recognizing her independence, should she be able to establish a *de facto* government, sufficiently strong to warrant such an act. Mr. Mann sent sixteen reports to his government, but while all the other papers, relating to the Hungarian mission, have been published without hesitancy, the Department of State, to the detriment of historical research, still refuses to permit the contents of these sixteen reports to become known. This is all the more incomprehensible, as the incident occurred sixty years ago, has no bearing whatever on present-day politics, and belongs now to history.

We know, however, that Mr. Mann was prevented by the Austrian authorities from enter-

ing Hungary, (he said so himself in a subsequent interview with Mr. Kossuth, mentioned by the latter in his Memoirs); and his presence there would have been, indeed, of little use, since through the brutal intervention of Russia the issue had been practically decided before his arrival in Vienna.

In September, 1849, the news that the President had sent a special agent to Hungary on a secret mission somehow became known and was published in a New York newspaper. Chevalier J. G. Hülsemann, the Austrian Chargé d'Affaires at Washington, sent a clipping of the article to the Foreign Office in Vienna, thinking, no doubt, to have furnished it thereby with a bit of interesting, if not valuable, information. How great must have been his astonishment, when he received a reply from Prince Schwarzenberg, from which it appeared that the latter had been cognizant of Mr. Mann's mission, in fact, had a copy of the American agent's secret instructions. He expressed his painful surprise at the American Government's conduct, and gave *his* idea of America's motives in the following words: "Was it in return for the friendship and confidence which we have never ceased to manifest toward the Government of the United States, that the latter was

waiting impatiently for and sought to hasten the moment, when it could profit by the downfall of the Austrian Monarchy and sell a few bales of cotton more at the expense of her existence?''

Then followed some boasting of Austria's great resources, her historical perseverance in defending her just rights, her splendid ''struggle of twenty-five years'' against the French revolution, her devotion to ''the principles of order,'' etc. But in spite of America's grave offence, Prince Schwarzenberg was willing to be lenient this time, should the American Government promise to behave in the future.

Such is the tenor of this remarkable exhibition of Austrian statesmanship, which concludes with authorizing the Chevalier to communicate its contents, if he think it proper, to those whom it may concern.

Chev. Hülsemann did not lodge at once an official protest, but left the letter with Mr. Derrick, Chief Clerk of the State Department, presumably in order to ascertain first how an official complaint would be received. Later he had a conversation with Mr. Clayton, then Secretary of State, who became convinced that Prince Schwarzenberg had surreptitiously obtained a copy of Mr. Mann's instructions. He

then told the Austrian Chargé that should he, as he threatened to do, address an official communication on the subject to him, he (Clayton) would be compelled to inquire into the mode by which the Imperial Government obtained a copy of a letter, confidentially addressed by the American Government to one of its agents.

This had its effect, at least for the time being. But in March, 1850, the Senate passed a resolution, requesting the President to place all papers concerning the Hungarian agent on the table of the Senate, if not incompatible with the public interest. The request was complied with in the same month, and some of the papers, including the instructions to Mr. Mann, were then made public. Now it was Chev. Hülsemann's opportunity to make his complaint without being open to the charge of having obtained his information through improper channels. It is not quite clear why he waited fully six months before doing so; probably he wrote again to Vienna for advice.

His protest was addressed to the new Secretary of State, Daniel Webster. In reference to Mr. Kossuth, he thought it offensive to his Government that this *rebel chief* was spoken of in the letter of instructions as an *illustrious man.* He closely followed the phraseology of

Prince Schwarzenberg's letter, mentioned above, but wisely omitted the reference to the sale of a few more bales of cotton. Instead he added some more boasting, assumed to speak also for Russia, declared that the American Government had exposed Mr. Mann to being treated as a spy, and intimated that the Imperial Government could retaliate in case of the repetition of America's misconduct.

The air of arrogant superiority, which permeated it, made this otherwise ludicrous protest highly offensive. Mr. Webster was greatly angered by it, and decided to administer a fitting rebuke.

His reply, known as *The Hülsemann Letter,* is unique in the history of diplomatic correspondence and will ever remain a classic piece of American literature. It is a splendid defense of the principles of popular government as contrasted with absolutism. He takes up and brilliantly refutes the Chevalier's statements and conclusions one by one, employing all through a dignified irony that is all the more stinging. To the boasts, it is true, he replies with counter-boasts, but they have in the vast extent and rich resources of America a better foundation than the Chevalier's. He proves the legitimacy and propriety of Mr. Mann's

mission, and adds that, had the Imperial Government subjected him to the treatment of a spy, the spirit of the people of this country would have demanded immediate hostilities to be waged by the utmost power of the republic, military and naval.

"In respect to the honorary epithet bestowed in Mr. Mann's instructions on the late chief of the revolutionary Government of Hungary, Mr. Hülsemann will bear in mind, that the Government of the United States cannot justly be expected, in a confidential communication to its own agent, to withhold from an individual an epithet of distinction to which a great part of the world thinks him worthy, merely on the ground that his own Government regards him as a rebel. At an early stage of the American revolution, while Washington was considered by the English Government as a rebel chief, he was regarded on the Continent of Europe as an illustrious hero."

Mr. Webster said later himself that his letter was somewhat boastful and rough, but the country at large approved of it with enthusiasm and thought that the rebuke was well deserved. Mr. Clayton, his predecessor in office, wrote him a congratulatory letter, which he closed with the

wish of "many more such victories over the Agents of Despotism."

Negotiations with the Sublime Porte for the release of Louis Kossuth and his associates and their transportation to the United States in a public vessel, were opened by Secretary Clayton and the American representative in Constantinople, Mr. Marsh, in January, 1850, but they were renewed and brought to a successful conclusion only in the following year during Mr. Webster's incumbency. Mr. Webster's instructions to Mr. Marsh are well worth reading as an able expression of noble sentiments.

The Austrian Government feigned displeasure at this turn of affairs, which it manifested to the world by hanging Mr. Kossuth in effigy on the very day of his embarkation on the U. S. frigate *Mississippi,* September 10, 1851. In reality, it was glad to see so dangerous an opponent transferred across the sea, where he would be cut off from the revolutionaries of Europe and could do less "mischief" than in or near Europe.

Mr. Kossuth, well understanding this, made a short stop in England to confer with his friends, and then proceeded on his journey to America, where he arrived December 4, 1851.

Of his reception in New York I shall not

speak at length on this occasion. In overflowing popular enthusiasm, in the demonstrations of respect and affection, in the military and civic honors paid to him, it was not surpassed by the reception given by the American people to any other man. All America, official and unofficial, united in doing him honor.

When the Government of the United States intervened with the Porte in behalf of Mr. Kossuth and the other Hungarian exiles, it was actuated purely by sentiments of humanity. The American people wished to save these true patriots from martyrdom on an Austrian scaffold, they offered them an asylum in their own free country, and passed a law authorizing the free distribution of land among the political refugees. These were noble deeds, which no Hungarian can remember without a feeling of profound gratitude, and which will ever redound to the glory of the American people.

But how little Mr. Webster and the American Government fathomed the depth of Mr. Kossuth's patriotism, is apparent from the fact that they expected him, though they never said so publicly, to come to America like any other immigrant, settle down and care no longer for the fate of his down-trodden country, of whose fight for liberty and independence he had been

the providential leader. Mr. Kossuth's efforts to enlist America's aid in the struggle, which he confidently hoped would soon be renewed, were perfectly consistent with, in fact, were the logical outcome of, the stand the American people and Government had taken toward Hungary during the preceding two years.

Mr. Webster had the greatest sympathy for Hungary's aspirations and was fully convinced of the righteousness of her cause. The principles enunciated in his famous speech on the emancipation of Greece applied equally well to the case of Hungary. This speech was often quoted, even by Mr. Kossuth himself, and Mr. Webster in the presence of Mr. Kossuth declared that in these principles and in the ones avowed in the Hülsemann Letter, "there was that which he could never part from without departing from himself." He, however, rejected the doctrine of *Intervention for Non-Intervention*, which Mr. Kossuth endeavored to have promulgated by the National Government, but refrained from making any public statement on the subject. For he believed—as he wrote to Mr. McCurdy, Chargé d'Affaires in Vienna — that the "Intervention" feeling, which was very strong in the Northern States, "will doubtless subside gradually and rapidly,

if nothing should take place calculated to kindle it into new flame.'' Fortunately or unfortunately, no event of such a character occurred in the next six months, and the ''Intervention'' feeling did gradually die away.

Mr. Webster's position in the whole affair, as head of the State Department, was very embarrassing. The relations with Austria had been very much strained. After the fall of Hungary, the Government had been attacked in both houses of Congress for not having recognized, in time, the independence of Hungary which might have given a different turn to events. Later, General Cass, of Michigan, moved in the Senate the suspension of diplomatic relations with Austria, and his motion was ably seconded by Senator Foote, of Missouri. The interposition in behalf of the Hungarian refugees and the Hülsemann Letter did not tend to improve matters. Chev. Hülsemann, with his excitable temperament and hectoring conduct, made himself thoroughly obnoxious to the American Government, and Mr. Webster was, at one time, ''much inclined to signify that his presence here (Washington) was not longer desirable.'' After Mr. Kossuth's arrival in America, Chev. Hülsemann harassed Mr. Webster with protests, but the

latter generally found some more or less ingenious pretext for refusing to consider them. With great skill he managed to swim with the stream of popular opinion, without bringing the relations with Austria to a decisive rupture.

In Washington Mr. Webster, as Secretary of State, presented Mr. Kossuth to President Fillmore, who bade him welcome in a polite but colorless speech and gave a dinner in his honor. The two Houses of Congress welcomed him to the country and the capital by joint resolution, and he was introduced by committee to both Houses.

Members of both Houses gave a public dinner in his honor, at which Mr. Webster was also present. The speech Mr. Kossuth delivered on this occasion was, at least as far as rhetoric and poetic language is concerned, his crowning masterpiece. This is how he began:

"As once Cyneas, the Epirote, stood among the Senators of Rome who, with an earnest word of self-conscious majesty, controlled the condition of the world and arrested the mighty kings in their ambitious march, thus full of admiration and of reverence I stand before you, Legislators of the new Capitol, that glorious hall of your people's collective majesty. The Capitol of old yet stands, but the spirit has de-

parted from it and come over to yours, purified by the air of liberty. The old stands a mournful monument of the fragility of human things: yours as a sanctuary of eternal rights. The old beamed with the red lustre of conquest, now darkened by oppression's gloomy night: yours beams with freedom's bright rays! The old absorbed the world by its own centralized glory: yours protects your own nation against absorption, even by itself. The old was awful with irrestricted power: yours is glorious with having restricted it. At the view of the old, nations trembled: at the view of yours, humanity hopes. To the old, Misfortune was only introduced with fettered hands to kneel at the triumphant conqueror's heels: to yours the triumph of introduction is granted to unfortunate exiles, invited to the honor of a seat. And where Kings and Cæsars never are hailed for their power, might and wealth, there the persecuted chief of a down-trodden nation is welcomed as your great Republic's guest, precisely because he is persecuted, helpless and poor."

No one had ever spoken to American statesmen like this before. Every word of this graceful and poetic tribute to the moral greatness of America went straight to the heart of his hearers. The Rev. C. M. Butler, a gentleman

by no means friendly to Mr. Kossuth, thus described the effect of this speech:

"At the Congressional dinner given to M. Kossuth his reception was most enthusiastic. In common with all the audience, I was completely entranced by his singularly captivating eloquence. I was assigned a seat next to Mr. Seward, and his demonstrations of applause by hands and feet and voice were excessive. The 'Hungarian Whirlwind' certainly carried away everything on that occasion, and mingled all parties into one confused mass of admirers, prostrate at M. Kossuth's feet.

"The speech seemed to me wanting in no element of a consummate masterpiece of eloquence. The orator's picturesque appearance, his archaic English style, his vibrant and thrilling voice, and his skillfully selected and arranged topics, all concurred in the production of an effect upon his audience such as I have never seen surpassed. As addressed to American statesmen, it exhibited what was very rare among foreigners, a perfect understanding of our government, as the union of separate states with their autonomy in a given sphere, under a general constitution."

It was felt that there was but one man in America to make a reply worthy of such elo-

quence: Daniel Webster. It was probably due to his ill health that on this occasion he fell behind his own best efforts, and that his reply bore no comparison with his celebrated speech on the Greek revolution and the Holy Alliance, although the principles treated were practically identical. But, however that may be, about one thing there can be no difference of opinion: paying no heed to Chev. Hülsemann's protests, he freely voiced his and his country's true sentiments, concluding with these words:

"We shall rejoice to see our American model upon the Lower Danube and upon the mountains of Hungary. But that is not the first step. It is not that which will be our first prayer for Hungary. The first prayer shall be that Hungary may become independent of all foreign power; that her destinies may be entrusted to her own hands and to her own discretion.

"I do not profess to understand the social relations and connections of races, and several other things that may affect the public institutions of Hungary. All I can say is, that Hungary can regulate these matters for herself infinitely better than they can be regulated for her by Austria: and therefore I limit my aspi-

rations for Hungary, for the present, to that single and simple point:

"Hungarian independence: Hungarian control of Hungary's destinies: and Hungary as a distinct nationality among the nations of Europe."

This was more than the already exasperated Chev. Hülsemann could bear. Contrary to diplomatic usage, he addressed himself directly to the President in a doleful French epistle, complaining of Mr. Webster's "hostility" to him and characterizing the Hülsemann Letter as "a revolutionary manifesto and a fanfaron appeal to all perturbers of the public peace of Europe." President Fillmore, waiving all ceremonies, gave him an interview, and explained to him that Mr. Webster had appeared at the Congressional Banquet in the capacity of a free American citizen, for whose utterances the Government could not be held responsible. This was not satisfactory to the Chevalier, and he left Washington in a rage. After the subsidence of the Kossuth fever he was, however, in a more conciliatory mood, and resumed his duties at Washington.

Mr. Webster was twenty years the senior of Mr. Kossuth, and when they met, the latter was in the meridian and the former in the last year

of his life. They cherished for each other the sincere admiration always inspired by genius. But, though their ideals were similar, no closer friendship sprung up between them, owing partly to the difference in their ages and to the reserve forced upon Mr. Webster by his official position. Mr. Webster departed this life three months after Mr. Kossuth's return to Europe. The latter always kept him in grateful memory, and in his Memoirs, written thirty years later in his exile, remembered him with genuine admiration.

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